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ABSTRACT

The concept of regionalism identifies the issues in public affairs pertaining to a region and develops structures through which citizens can participate in the decisionmaking process. This speech describes educational decisions in the State of New York as affected by local decentralization and by concentration of power at the State level. Relevant to this condition, educational theorists have advanced the idea that some form of regional instrument should be developed in New York metropolitan areas to provide school services planning for elementary and secondary education. The achievement of such a structure depends on citizen recognition of the value of regionalism as an approach to educational policy. (MLF)

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POLITICS, PLANNING AND REGIONALISM

By

Jerome Zukosky*

"Better planning" is a phrase that few investigations of those problems we associate with urbanization can expect to avoid. It is given as a prescription for curing ills of concrete matters such as overflowing sewers and garbage dumps and ethereal ones such as the need to "improve the quality of life," an acceptance and reverence no doubt due to the vagueness of what we mean by the word planning. At its vaguest, it indicates a form of cooperative endeavor to harness human intelligence in the service of social concern so that the future may be perceived with some clarity, matters arranged beforehand and life made pleasant for all concerned. Public officials or citizens arguing opposite sides of any public issue can usually agree that what is needed is better planning or more coordination and leave their luncheon tables to go about their business uplifted.

All rational persons and organizations "plan" their affairs and to attempt to make clear what planning is would be to begin a book that would be interesting and useful but impossible here. One important distinction, however, is necessary when we talk about planning activities

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which involve the use of public power and funds in pursuit of public purposes, such as the provision of elementary and secondary education. This is the distinction between those who have the power and legal responsibility, delegated by citizens through the political process, to manage such affairs and those who do not but who nonetheless influence those who do through formulation of plans, programs, policies and opinions. The Governor, Legislature and chief educational bureaucracy of New York or any other state, engage in planning just as each local school district or board does, the results of which are most forcefully presented in their decisions embodied in budgets, capital spending programs, tax levies and changes in administrative procedure. Through these decisions resources are allocated that shape what takes place in the classroom in the most fundamental way, although it is difficult to make the relationship precise. Then there is that activity, at some remove from those decisions, but intended to influence them directly or indirectly, that is also called planning and is surrounded by a more conscious elaboration of itself as a special craft and its practitioners as craftsmen in an art, whether "city planners" or "regional planners" or vice presidents within large organizations in charge of "planning." They too wish to influence the allocation of resources but their most familiar instrument is a model or argument of what should be, of greater or lesser ambition ranging from full-blown creations of the new to specific proposals for changes in existing arrangements now. A tension exists between these two activities and groups, most often expressed in the difference between what is and what should be, between what is best, more equitable or morally proper and what can be, is wanted or is possible. Those who consider themselves "planners" in the self-conscious use

of the term must carry in their heads an awareness of what really should be; those who consider themselves makers of budgets and wielders of the power that goes with making budgets and levying taxes, including winning elections so they can exercise that power, must carry in their heads an awareness of a different order of reality and inspiration. The object of enlightened public policy should be to ameliorate this tension. It is the essential problem of those concerned with establishing instruments through which regional planning of educational services can be accomplished.

The idea that some form of regional instrument should be developed in metropolitan areas to provide school services planning has been widely accepted among theorists dealing with the institutional arrangements through elementary and secondary education is provided, just as it has among political scientists and others concerned for several generations with developing regional instruments for the planning of non-school services and facilities. The work of Robert J. Havighurst during the past decade, for example, has been instrumental in popularizing this idea as an approach to public policy, administrative endeavor and research. The body or instrument so conceived has lodged within it substantial power to manage the educational enterprise, whether called "planning" or fleshed out more fully in the form of a metropolitan educational authority or board or federation of school districts on the model of the Metropolitan Toronto School Board; the point at which "planning" becomes "governing" the schools is at best indistinct but the intent is clear: to induce into the deliberations, and the decisions that flow from them, of elected school government officials some representation or awareness of the needs and aspirations of the people of the metropolis as a community increasingly inter-related and bound to-

gether. A great deal of debate among theorists takes place over what substantial power should inhere in regional instruments, how their relations to local school governments and citizens and the state should be defined and how they can influence decisions of importance through which resources are allocated. There seems little debate, however, that those decisions -- how they are made and their effect on the distribution and availability of resources -- should change or be changed to solve important problems. These include the unequal incidence of taxation for school purposes, the maldistribution of resources that results in inequitable educational opportunity, the inefficiencies in competition for scarce resources such as talent, the lack of adequate research and the increasingly inability of local governments to deal satisfactorily with their employees.

The logical force of such proposals rests on perception of the primitive organization of school governments to deal with the dynamics of urbanization. Indeed, it is possible to state that the institutional arrangements through which public education is provided are more primitive than that through which other important public services and facilities are provided; although my observations here are limited to New York State, they are not inapplicable to other populous, urban states in which the state and its local school districts and boards share the task of planning, financing and managing public elementary and secondary education. The basic governmental powers over this most important public activity are extraordinarily fragmented locally and, although this is not as often observed, concentrated in a special manner at the state capitol. There a highly independent bureaucracy, the

Education Department, exercises great regulatory control over the activities of each local unit in a "one-to-one" relationship; there is no intervening unit to dilute this connection and it makes the local district-state departmental tie a basic one in the school government structure. This pattern of acute decentralization of power locally and concentration at the state level does not obtain in the arrangements effected for planning, financing and managing other important state activities such as transportation, public welfare or parks and recreation. There are, for example, 18 school districts and boards in Monroe County covering the bulk of the Rochester metropolitan population, over 30 in the state's second largest metropolitan area, that centered on Buffalo and more than 40 in Westchester County and more than 50 in Nassau County covering just pieces of the vast New York City region. There is no instrument comparable, for example, to the County of Monroe to tax all citizens and property for certain services and facilities used by the metropolitan population and its commerce such as airports, port facilities, roads, higher education (through the county junior college) and libraries. There is no formal planning agency comparable to the county planning department which, in Monroe and other urban counties, is assuming greater influence through both local and state legislation over patterns of land development and the response of towns, villages and county departments themselves to problems of economic development. There is no instrument within school government comparable to the Genesee-Rochester Transportation Authority or the Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority or the Metropolitan Transportation Authority in the New York City region to whom the state has delegated the important

powers to plan, finance and manage important transport services and facilities, including the power to levy charges to operate them, raise capital through bond issues (supplemented by state bond funds) and to direct the basic future planning activities for transportation within their regions separate from, although in cooperation with, that accomplished by the state transportation department. This pattern of decentralization of power and its reconstitution on regional bases is without clear pattern, either in New York or other states, but can be detected in all of them in the growth of regional planning commissions, service agencies and public corporations and through modification and strengthening of urban county governments.

Regionalism as an operative concept of public policy, of law and of citizen awareness is extremely weak, however, when applied to public education, where even a countywide association of administrators, employees or elected officers is considered a notable advance over local self-interest. By regionalism I mean that impulse to define issues or problems as those encompassing people or interests affecting much or all of a densely populated geographic area and to look to state law to establish corporate bodies equipped with the necessary power to concern themselves effectively with such issues. Regionalism is a process, one through which opinion is formed that perceives issues in public affairs as pertaining to a region and seeks to develop instruments through which the interests of citizens and groups can be articulated in decisions affecting them throughout the region. That regionalism is weak within school government relations and citizen perceptions of the educational process is no doubt a function of the very close relationship of the

public schools to neighborhood, family and locality; one can observe a similar parochialism in the exercise of land use controls by citizens and their elected local officials. In the exercise of public powers over schools and community development one encounters the most intimate feelings of citizens about themselves and their desire to influence the character of the environment in which they and their children live and grow. There is a special and ironic relation here between the dynamics of urbanization in metropolitan areas and the intensity of citizen feeling involved in efforts they make to control the character of neighborhood; the more intense and deep the changes wrought in the daily lives of citizens, by migration within the region, by the necessity for increased travel throughout it in pursuit of work, shopping, entertainment and recreation, the more intense is the desire to isolate and segregate oneself in environments where conflict and change are minimized and where the citizen can exert some measure of control over change. This, I think, may explain that curious phenomenon of increased awareness of the metropolitan community as a whole that does exist and that tenacious holding onto, and in many cases increased resistance to change in, neighborhood and a seeking for community on a small scale that one also finds in metropolitan life. Powerful forces are at work binding metropolitan populations together; just as powerful ones operate to segregate them and differentiate out resistance to complete unity, and the institutions of metropolitan life must accomodate to them both.

Those engaged in planning as a special art, when they engage in efforts to promote a "more rational" decision-making system for metropolitan areas often attempt to minimize the fact they are reformers of fundamental institutional relations, and often very radical ones at that,

without so announcing themselves. At bottom the most important issues that impel reform of the institutional structure of school government require change in how decisions are made to allocate resources, most of which are measurable in money and to promote the availability of resources which is also a function of money. There is much debate about what constitutes efficient and effective use of resources in the educational process. There should be no question, however, that any effort to change the way decisions are made to use those resources will also require change in the power of those individuals and organizations that now make those decisions, such as from whom and how much money is to be raised and by whom and for what purpose it is to be spent. These are the ultimate political questions and they cannot be determined or decided anywhere but within the political process.

They are political questions in two senses of the word. The focus of the most important decision-making powers, including those of the Education Department, and those of all local school governments are embodied in law susceptible to change only through the action of elected officials of which the Legislature is one group although not the only one. Then there is a more subtle but equally important sense in which changing the power relations inhering in the existing school government structure is a political question. It is rarely put into words, especially by those involved, because differences of opinion about substantive issues in public affairs tend to be clothed in abstract, intellectual or simply abstruse terms. Consider a problem from my own experience. I was speaking with a municipal official of the virtues of a regional school board encompassing his city and its surrounding suburbs that would, among other things, "manage" vocational education. As it happens, the largest vocational training facility in the region was a high school

managed by his city's board of education to which suburban students travelled and whose tuition was paid by their home districts. I suggested that by placing control over the school in the hands of a board representing all the school districts of his county a "more rational" means would be at hand for planning such things as future expansion of the facility and course offerings to "meet the needs of the region as a whole" more effectively than the present contract system would, especially by dampening the impulse of the suburban boards to band together and erect their own vocational facility, much to the detriment of the potential one large regional facility had for achieving a measure of racial integration in the classroom. The official was not sympathetic. Was not the present system working well and where could I point to shortcomings? Did not the appropriate administrators meet regularly and debate these very issues; why advance a scheme that would likely introduce conflict into these arrangements and perhaps lead to just that duplication and separation of facilities I feared? But his major interest lay elsewhere, particularly in what power those outside his own board of education would have over the jobs, budgets and capital costs of the vocational school. It was clear that here he felt his own power threatened along with that of the municipal government to whom his board of education was responsible and responsive. This politician's political sensibilities were aroused and such sensibilities are a corollary of power to make decisions. They exist in every dimension in which it is possible to describe the educational process' institutional framework and within every substantive issue that raises its head. This is why elected officials are quite tolerant of much talk about remedies for such evils as racial segregation in the schools but act differently when a proposal is advanced to change the power they have,

or that of administrators answerable to them, to determine who attends their schools and under what terms and conditions are attendance districts drawn. A good politician in the latter case will probably say nothing, other than it is a proposal worth studying, knowing full well that the political sensibilities of his consitutents will soon be engaged and his task is to observe them, reflect them and perhaps influence them, all of which take place in that arena we call politics. A politician's importance and his power to make decisions, or to act as if he made decisions, are not separable and they provide an inescapable obstacle to any proposal that seeks to change the balances of decision-making powers that now exist.

These are not only those of local school governments or municipal governments with dependent boards of education but include those of the central state educational bureaucracy, the Executive and the Legislature as well. That bureaucracy enjoys great institutional strength as a result of its regulatory discretion in the affairs of local districts and administrators no less than elected officials relinquish power easily. To the extent that regional instruments would diminish state regulatory influence through its central bureaucracy, to that extent that bureaucracy will be reluctant to promote courses of action that will enhance the development of them or be bold in feeling for the possibilities of innovation through regionalism. This meekness in the face of demands for change is probably buttressed by a very deep aversion to widespread public consideration of basic change in school government insitutitons. It would raise other issues that are exceedingly sensitive. One of them is the peculiar division of labor and responsibility one finds in state capitols between the Executive and his educational department and its

governing board; in New York State the Governor and the Legislative do not have effective control over this establishment yet must bear the risks involved in raising the funds it spends according to policies it develops. This diffusion of power and responsibility tends to augment and enhance that which exists locally in metropolitan areas and gives the state-local governmental system for education a peculiarly amorphous character. The relationship between the chief elected officers of the state and the education bureaucracy, between politics and education and between politicians and school administrators are changing rapidly and are not susceptible to easy formulation but it seems clear that the traditionally wide separation between them is breaking down and new relations are being established, locally and in state capitols.

This discussion of power, decision making and politics may seem strangely irrelevant to the concerns of planning and planners, and I am aware that normally such concerns are expressed differently in terms that are much more finite, measurable and technical on the one hand and more ethereal on the other. Resources, power, money are cold categories compared with problems of human beings in metropolis and especially of children and the learning process, meaning and method in education and the goals of this most important of public activities and private concern. Yet planning, if it is to accomplish change worth discussing must perforce change the way decisions and the power to make them are institutionalized within a politically determinable arrangement and any instrument we might imagine to accomplish this in practice, that is, as it effects the lives of citizens and their children, must have a portion of those powers that now inhere elsewhere; in no metropolitan area

of New York State, nor, as far as I have been able to determine, in no other state as well, do instruments exist in metropolitan areas generally with that power necessary to make plans for their areas and translate them into action or actuality or even begin to define, on the most preliminary basis, what the relevant ideas, programs and questions are that should be so translated. No matter how one wishes to disguise the fact, any effort to promote those courses of action that will permit citizens and their elected officials to discern and then act on those larger interests and aspirations of the metropolis as a community must engage the political sensibilities of both citizens, their officials and those who make "plans."

When the political sensibilities of planners are so engaged, it will be seen that any reform that is labelled as desirable but not "politically feasible" is but an exercise in the imaginative uses of intellect and not that which citizens require; conversely, any proposal that aims to be "politically feasible" and therefore "effective" is redundant if one means by effective the translation of an idea into action that affects citizens and is relevant to their concerns for it is only through political action that such concerns are translated into reality. To be effective in this sense is a different matter than being logical or susceptible of "proof" in the social sciences. To ignore this difference is to risk effort that will be part of that uninspiring work resting in the dark of good intentions and irrelevance. It is a risk that need not be taken if one has respect for and understanding of the requirements for change within a democratic polity and the political process through which such change is accomplished. That process operates to

minimize conflict, provide for incremental change in power as well as to vary widely diffuse power and to make change responsive to needs felt by large portions of the electorate. Politics and political process, however, impose severe limitations upon those who would promote change of the order we have been concerned with -- important change in the way decisions are made to allocate resources of the single most important public activity within the domestic governmental system in those areas where the bulk of Americans live. The most severe limitation is that it forces the observer or the reformer or planner outside the system of organized power and institutional relations to understand how that system works before he can change it, to accept its realities without subsuming his own ideals to them and to learn to accept the perceptions of citizens of what is right, proper and morally compelling rather than his own as guideposts to action.

These are particularly severe limitations upon those who undertake to reform the institutions of school governance in metropolitan areas, where conflict over resources and the public powers to raise them are acute and substantial, where effective public power is extremely diffuse and politics is strained by tidal movements of population, where popular expectation of the role of education is rising much faster than the institutions supplying it can meet. It is not difficult to prescribe the institutional forms necessary to "solve" problems nor the public policies necessary in specific instances to ameliorate these conflicts or end gross disparities in resources and merge or submerge local self-interest into a larger one. It is not even difficult to describe the suitable institutional forms, such as a new metropolitan school board or even a regional planning board to "make policy" or "coordinate" affairs. But

unfortunately, all that one accomplishes is a statement of the obvious: that if such diffusion of power, such intransigent regard for self-interest, such reluctance to diminish one's power to influence decisions on the part of politicians or administrators did not exist or could be banished forthwith, agreement would be possible on those flinty problems of raising money and deciding who would spend it, of mixing poor children and ones from homes of wealth, of sharing tax resources and computers. One could write a book, as Robert Bendiner has done for example in his recent study, The Politics of the Schools: A Crisis in Self-Government, (Harper and Row, 1969) holding forth the metro Toronto arrangement as that to which public policy should aspire in New York and elsewhere and do very little to move levers of power necessary to affect the daily lives and perceptions of most citizens. The writing of such books is not unworthwhile but it is not the most important task of the moment nor that to which those who would call themselves planners should aspire. What is pressing and urgent is to make the logic and the clarity of regionalism as an approach to policy the property of the concerned and informed citizen. It is his perceptions and experience, not ours or that of planners, that will determine the "feasibility" or chance of acceptance of necessary change, for ultimately what we mean by "political feasibility" rests upon popular or citizen acceptance as much as anything else and more than most analysts of institutional arrangements and how to change them admit. And the plain but uncomfortable fact of the matter is that the citizen is almost completely unaware of what we mean by the metropolitan community as a community, its institutions of public education and how they work and where and how they must be changed to make them work better.

This may seem a curious statement after I have used such terms as metropolitan school government structure, ~~community and institutional~~ arrangements with apparent ease, suggesting that perhaps there is clear agreement on what one means by such terms in, for example, the Rochester metropolitan area of New York State or in the files of learned men anywhere. There is not. The very notion of a "metropolitan" school government structure or what constitutes "educational" goods and services in the Rochester region -- even what should or does constitute the extent of such a region -- is unknown in detail of the most elementary kind. It is the great virtue of the study conducted by Craig Smith and his associates of the Rochester Center for Governmental and Community Research, Inc.,* that both the ignorance of what constitutes such services and arrangements for providing them were brought to light, shaped by the knowledge of the researchers as an inter-related "metropolitan" whole. An even more comprehensive study was made by Dr. Robert E. Lamitie and his associates of the Western New York School Development Council for the Buffalo region.** The Rochester report, covering school governments and their activities in one county, Monroe, and the Western New York report covering two, Erie and Niagara, are, to my knowledge, the first efforts in the state to delineate the rudiments of public

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*"Target: The Three E's: Efficiency of Organization, Equality of Educational Opportunity, Equity of Financing," Rochester: The Center, February, 1969, 114pp., mimeo.

**"Project 1990: The Future of Education on the Niagara Frontier," The Council: 1970. The study was issued as two reports, "Status and Projections," and "Alternatives for Planning."

elementary and secondary education as a problem of governing and governance in which the special and acute emphasis was on resources defined in terms of money, where it came from, how it was distributed and what were the key decisions involved in the process and who made them and how they were made. Although neither report so characterized itself, both were efforts to describe the political economy of education in their respective metropolitan areas.

Before citizens can embark on schemes to induce change in the institutional relations that govern the allocation of resources and change the power to make decisions through which that allocation occurs it is imperative that what those relations are and how resources and power are used are clearly understood. In most metropolitan areas such knowledge does not exist. It does not exist within the areas of competence of most experts in the field and it is quite likely that the men who did perform the studies mentioned have become aware of the very great need for further exploration. Their reports were written as educational documents in the largest sense of the word: an elementary lesson in the civics of school government, an introductory course in regional education's political economy addressed to those whose understanding is needed for any effort at reform, the citizens of their areas.

Both reports document the impulses to regionalism already in existence in specific institutional forms and arrangements and how they may be enhanced by legislative and administrative action. They recognize implicitly the realities of politics that govern the world in which the educational process takes place, accommodating to it rather than opposing or ignoring it; thus the emphasis is on incremental change and how to accomplish it, building upon existing arrangements, adapting them to form a foundation for regional decision-making channels of ever-increasing

sophistication, scope, managerial power and influence on what takes place in the classroom. Most important of all, they both recognize that regionalism contains its own dynamics contained in the actions and inter-actions of citizen, elected official and political leadership and that planning should aspire to establishing the conditions under which the most fruitful interrelations can occur in practice. They are not reports ~~which are efforts~~ by outsiders to "solve" problems but a way of illustrating the underlying political and economic facts of problems and possible ways of changing those facts. They are exceedingly political in their outlook because they both recognize that the actions that can be taken are those of citizens as political beings and the facts susceptible to change only through the political process.

This posture can easily be faulted. There is a lack of concrete model-making, a seeming evasion of what the future should look like in any dimension except certain bare demographic projections related to rudimentary needs. There is a seeming evasion of such issues favored by academic experts in administration and administrators as how one should apportion "responsibilities" or "functions" among metropolitan, local and state officials and agencies, for example. There is a lack of attention to "program" -- what should be the "agenda" for regional discussion by officials or administrators or citizens or even of the need for further study, and how it might be undertaken, to ascertain the economies of scale possible and in what specific instances such effort should be directed.

All of this can also be lauded as virtue, however. For implicitly the posture taken recognizes that these are matters to be defined in public debate and in private among the participants and that the most important thing at the moment is to achieve that debate and definition,

that the more imposing structures or institutional relations so often projected as the means to the end of regional decision making will grow and must grow from experience and the special needs of each metropolitan area.

These efforts at mapping the political economy of the schools in metropolitan areas deserve the utmost encouragement from the state although I do not think the prospects for such encouragement are promising in New York. Certainly the lack of a well-formulated program is testimony to the lack of leadership and imagination in promoting regionalism on the part of the Education Department. It is significant that the funds for the Buffalo study were provided by federal Title III grants and that the bulk of that for the Rochester region came from local public and private sources. A useful model for such a program is that which the federal government used in an analogous situation during the 1960's to call into being regional agencies to coordinate the planning of federally-aided public works such as highways and other transport facilities, sewers and water supply systems, hospitals and libraries by officials of the local governments concerned and appropriate state and federal administrators. This was the technique of requiring regional review of certain projects by planning boards on which sat representatives of local, state and federal governments with the power necessary to direct the projects and be politically accountable for the decisions of the group. Provision for this review was contained in the Housing Act of 1966, known as the Demonstration Cities and Metropolitan Development Act, Public Law 89-754. The act also provided that the Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development be authorized to supplement by up to 20 per cent the federal grant in aid for such projects as an incentive for adhering to the federal criteria of proper

review and representation. Use of a similar program could involve suitable discretion by the Education Commissioner in the use of bonus funds applicable to state aid. A good measure of ingenuity would be required to delineate representation of regional boards, what and how they should review, the nature of appropriate comment and its effect; this would be the task of legislation that should be permissive, as open-ended and pragmatic as possible and designed primarily to call into being one or a few such boards at first so that further experience could be gained. There will probably be conflict between the state purposes pursued through this means and those being pursued with federal dollars through the 16 regional planning centers called into existence under provisions of the Title III of the ESEA of 1965 in the state. This is undoubtedly to be desired since closer meshing of the work of such centers with both local school governments and the state education bureaucracy is needed. It would be essential, however, that in a state regional planning board program, representation consist primarily or exclusively of elected school government officers.

A program of this kind would galvanize regionalism. It would force that essential cooperation in matters where it would be necessary for the participants to discover that they must subsume some of their local self-interest and parochial concern in decisions that affect all of them and thus begin to work out institutional forms that would make this possible in a wider sphere of activity [redacted]. Such boards would also permit the education department personnel concerned to exert influence on the decisions so taken and participate in them, [redacted] for, as I have indicated, regionalism cannot proceed without reference to this relationship. Such a program would permit higher levels of state aid, which are inevitable, to be used constructively and with

utmost leverage at the foundations of school government structure, instructing both local district officers and state officials in the outlines of the difficult journey ahead towards more formal changes in the powers of them all.

Experience with regionalism contains the seeds of its own evolution, and it is a progress that is impossible to chart in any diverse, populous state. Developing that experience should be the object of that activity we call planning. Making regionalism real in practice is but another way of stating that the grander ideals and ideas of regionalism must be defined by and for citizens and their elected officials themselves and thus be made manifest in public policy and in law.

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